

HENRI
MATISSE

ZEICHNUNGEN UND GOUACHES DÉCOUPÉES

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Was the satiny paint quality of the early Nice years a response to living by the shimmering surface of the Mediterranean? Light reflected from it will quietly irradiate depicted rooms, bounce back down from their ceilings, clarify volume by casting shadows. The conjunction of water, land and sky will be celebrated, and with all the excitement that the thrill of discovery can produce. How wonderful to see the translucent blue water elbow its way into the land in a shamelessly impetuous rush of perspective: *La baie de Nice*, 1918 (cat. New York 1992, pl. 223). Turn the bay on its side in 1935 and reverse the color. A real elbow now thrusts its way into blueness. Perspective or foreshortening? We ask because the sleeping woman of *Le rêve* (cat. New York 1992, pl. 304) is no ordinary creature but a giantess. She dreams the cosmos and ourselves within it. Foreshortening is a term we employ to describe the recession in space of relatively small objects, like chairs or the human body. Perspective is a term we reserve for describing the recessional properties of their context, be it architecture or landscape. That we feel vastness here is partially attributable to the artist's astounding control of contour, of its implied movement in space, now small (foreshortening), now large (perspective).

After another hearty leap through time – an interval of seventeen years – we find ourselves in 1952 and with many of the themes in hand that we will need to appreciate the great *Nu bleu* cutouts. In another reversal, the color of the sea has at last flooded the body – an immense idea. Note the headland of the knee and follow the tremendous sweeping curves of the coastline, the sinuous bays formed by the bending of right arm and right leg (see p. 271, cat. 151). Relish the lightness induced by the blue, a color which fools the eye by focusing slightly in front of the retina, not on it, as all the others do. This produces confusion in the reading of forms in space. (Make the experiment. Wear a pair of sunglasses which eliminate UV and see just how much more three dimensional the world appears.) Foldings, overlaps and body parts like breasts are carved out of the blue itself, defined by the white of the ground. He was sculpting in color, dispensing with shadow. Where darkness had been, light and air would be.

Lightness yes, but massiveness as well. Limbs loop out

then double back on themselves. A leg will wrap around a shia, a hand lie over a foot, another hand lie behind the head, thigh and lower leg lie behind, then wrap around, thigh and lower leg; forms in front of forms. And they're big, these ladies. They sit and yet they almost fill the entire pictorial space. Were they to stand, we'd lose more than half of them to unseen upper reaches. This is compression. An undeployed energy system, folded, all wrapped round itself, unleashes literal movement in the viewer's eye. It coasts beguilingly, gliding and sliding, swinging hither and yon, zigging and zagging; soon to be joined by the entire nervous system of the body in this lilted, spiralling dance.

And now we close our eyes, the better to remember – and oh, how easily we do – the sound of scissors cutting through thickish colored paper, the feel in the hand of crunchy resistance. Is this what he was referring to in his later years when he wrote an article entitled *Looking at Life with the Eyes of a Child?* (published in 1953). There were glories of effectiveness, of making, that we all experienced as children – cutting paper, gluing it, drawing with crayons. Tool. Goal. Dazzling accomplishment! He had used cut paper in the early thirties when working on the Barnes Foundation murals. Later, condemned to chair and bed by illness and decrepitude, he would find release in gigantic collages. No more completed paintings after 1948. No more touch. No more naked brushwork, nor the powerful tactility and radiance of color it induces. The matte surfaces of evenly spread gouache cannot set our muscles tingling in kinetic mimesis of the artist's painting gestures. The searching, filling, shaping movements of the brush are gone. Yet for that loss, we have staggering compensation. We cease to see *through* our bodies, and enter, bouyant, weightless, the paradise of effortlessness. And what do we feel? Wonder. Now we know – remember – what it is to look with the eyes of a child. At the end, the satisfaction that had been his life was named, and by being named, was justified. But that was for us. Wonder had been there all along, unaccompanied by words.

The child's experience of size is dramatic. A world made for the fully grown looms around him. Giants stalk through his life, just as they do through his nursery tales. Nothing so swiftly returns us to the thrilling awe of childhood as the

huge. And what could be huger than the repeating pattern of swirling arabesques and flower baskets of *Harmonie rouge / La desserte* of 1908? (cat. New York 1992, pl. 105). But this immenseness does not terrify. It enchants. It produces, by contrast, a charming diminutiveness in the serving woman. Because it invades every surface, distant and near, the patterning causes the space to collapse, creating a feeling of safety and fullness. The color itself, the rose red, identified as it is with the repeating pattern, is scaled up as well, acquires blazing intensity, as it is carried forward with the patterning, pushed into our faces. Like the child's world, this one is close up also. Here is the plenitude experienced at the mother's breast. And, of course, food is on the way.

This was a favorite pattern and it will appear again and again. He loved textiles in all their varieties and could be very loyal to their shapes if not always to their colors. In *L'atelier rose* of 1911 (cat. New York 1992, pl. 136) a Gauguinesque fabric – another favorite – draped over a folding screen, holds center stage. The *Intérieur aux aubergines* of 1911 (cat. New York 1992, pl. 145) shows the artist's unique ability to create effects based on patterning which are at once charming and majestic. We are lured into the space by the mirror, window, and centrally positioned table with its small sculpture and vegetables. Every time our eye wanders from these elements, however, it is confronted by a lighthearted but relatively huge repeating motif which spreads across floor and wall. Its regularity suggests that it continues out beyond the confines of the picture surface, pulling the eye to the edges, producing an impression of great breadth, relaxed grandeur.

The nomad surrounds himself with textiles. Portable, comforting, familiar, he can make himself at home in a flash. In the early twenties, the nomadic Matisse, ever loyal to his beloved textiles, had special frames made for mounting them. They were then incorporated into the painting process, used to alter existing settings or to create entirely new ones. When we consider what a pioneer he was before World War I in the simplification of painting, this is interesting because it runs so counter to the drift of the age. Vuillard, no stranger to the delights of decorative patterning, shows the new world of taste in *The Black Cups* of 1919–24 – its austere view of architectural setting and decor, its simplified hair styles and clothes. But Matisse was no chronicler of his times. He will domesticate the exotic in the lean, clean twenties; cast, costume, design scenery and decorate sets for, his very own opera of the eye. It is fascinating to watch him surrender to the intricacies of

these difficult patterns, submit to the discipline of getting them right. Great powers of concentration are suggested by this and indeed, acts of concentration, of inwardness, will be depicted – people playing checkers or musical instruments, reading, or simply lost in thought (*Femme devant un aquarium*, cat. New York 1992, pl. 255). Unlike the invasive patterning of the pre-war years, these will observe decorum, recognise the logic of furniture and rooms, be often firmly bounded by borders.

It was a glad day for humanity when printed textiles and wallpapers became inexpensive and abundant. That Matisse felt the gladness of heart they produce is evident. Equally evident, he pondered their principles of organization, pondered, in fact, how decorative poetics could be made available to painting. He had seen how both van Gogh and Gauguin had profited, how they had emboldened and enriched their work; the former with swirling textiles and papers, the latter with the magnificently simple and vividly colored fabrics of the South Pacific. How could the local joys of the decorative arts be spread out over an entire pictorial surface? Early, middle and late, we find him addressing this question. A lifetime's thought on the subject will be summed up in *La perruche et la sirène* of 1952 (see pp. 279–281, cat. 156).

The first impression is of flabbergasting scale. It is nearly 8 meters long and more than 3 meters high, yet looks like it was simply wished into existence. The second impression is of astounding breadth: breadth of design, of conception. To achieve this, spatial depth had to be sacrificed. Forms do not overlap. This is an utterly legible world, shadowless, with nothing hidden or obscured, with everything in the same sharp, clear focus. Because of this, it's a world which feels blissfully safe and reassuring. The instinctive fear which we all feel upon entering an unknown space (so obvious in the behaviour of household pets) is cancelled out by its very shallowness. And how immaculately clean it all is, how dazzlingly white and bright! Further, a by now familiar game of scale announces itself. The botanical citizens of this vegetal paradise outbulk in sheer biomass the representatives of sky and sea, our parakeet and mermaid.

And what botany it is! Matisse had had his way with other living forms, why not plants as well? We have to remind ourselves that tropical houseplants were not always easily procurable. Matisse's work registers this friendly green invasion – aroids for the most part – monstera and philodendron, but fern as well. Yes, cut flowers in vases will

continue right up to the late years, but they begin to meet serious competition for the attention of the artist in the thirties, when the new plants begin to burgeon everywhere, bringing with them their jolting greens and wiggling contours. Like Monet and his beloved hybridized water lilies, and at about the same time in his life, Matisse will make these plants his, render them icons of the modern. We see his very own hybrid – “*Philodendron matisseana*” – four immense leaves, dramatically deployed across the upper background of *La Musique/La guitariste* of 1939. (cat. New York 1992, pl. 319). But what was background will become foreground, take on starring role, command, in fact, the entire pictorial field.

These leaves loop backwards and forwards in an extremely shallow space – easily, glidingly, splendidly – just as we ourselves have been looping backwards and forwards in time. Their distant cousins, in the supreme Amsterdam cutout of 1952, will be doing much much more. Yet their startling dynamism is the result of study and experiment. The stencils, *Océanie, le ciel* and *Océanie, la mer* (cat. New York 1992, pls. 370, 371; see pp. 248–249, cat. 132, 133) based on cutout maquettes of 1946, show just how far Matisse could progress in a mere six years. These images are relatively static. The desire to characterize widely varying life forms forced the artist to put a lot of space around each one so that the differences between them would be neutralized. They were positioned in a highly regular pattern which was further stabilized by a border.

In 1952, the leaves partake of a generic similarity. Their differences mainly arise from their orientation in space, the chief clues to which are provided by the spine of the leaf. When it runs down the center, with lobes of equal length on either side, we have the impression of seeing it from above, with the added effect of motionlessness (see pp. 279–281). When the lobes of one side or the other are longer, we feel that we are seeing the effect of foreshortening, that the leaf is rotating either toward us or away (see pp. 279–281). When the spine runs, not the length, but the width of the leaf, and when it is located towards one end, we get an impression of swooping movement, upwards or downwards (see pp. 279–281). When the rotation is so extreme as to leave only one set of lobes in view we could have an effect of slow, graceful, ballooning of form (see pp. 279–281) or one of spatial rush, as all the lobes speed towards one acute angle, seemingly distended by their own great velocity (see pp. 279–281).

Different orientations, different directions of movement,

different speeds, different dynamic modes – life, animated and abundant. The eye surfs across the surface, grouping now for color, now for shape, now for direction, or for any combination of them. The compositional forces lull us into a deliciously soothing mental state as we loll along in this endlessly modulating, buoyant world of intersecting arcing patterning.

What shapes this dance, what gravity-like force drives its evolutions? The close packing of forms does not lead to jarring chaos. Anything but. What makes for connection here? for relatedness? A switching mechanism powers this dynamo. The white ground does not skulk behind the forms, but is taken up by them. As it moves towards the spine and the lobes thin out, it swells up (see pp. 279–281) Here, it shines most brightly, becomes a positive white shape which lies on top of the now negative darker ground. Air turns to opaque substance. Negotiable space becomes brilliant mineral. Flashes of light are released with each transformation. Gazing at this image is like looking at the sparkling sea or at wet foliage stirred by a breeze, newly glinting in the sunlight. This is nature, fresh and immaculate. And as space becomes light, so light acquires mass. The surface gains bulk, becomes tufted, as each leaf form is pushed towards us by the gleaming pressure of radiance.

Michelangelo had a simple rule of thumb for quality in a sculpture. He thought that a well designed one could be rolled down a hill without anything breaking off. What a long time it can be before we notice the vigorous simplicity underpinning the leaves. Like a figure skater looping back and forth in a rink, Matisse scissored his way out to the edge of the paper then turns back, each time leaving behind him a hint as to its former boundary. We notice how many of the leaves respect the outlines of the rectangular sheets of colored paper from which they were cut – a very Michelangelesque idea – and not so surprising from a man who owned a plaster cast of one of the Louvre’s *Bound Slaves*. Compression is yet another principle of coherence in this effortlessly expansive world – simple building blocks with complicated insides.

The revelation of painting came to Matisse when he was twenty, convalescing from an operation. He had been a sickly child and his life was punctuated by serious illnesses. He spent – notoriously – the last thirteen years of his life a semi-invalid, much confined to bed and wheelchair. Painting is an extremely physical activity and artists have all sorts of ways of coping with debility, perhaps smaller scale being the most common one. A large painting can

involve a great deal of ladder climbing and walking back and forth to judge the effect of a mark. The man who painted vigorous outdoor dancing on a monumental scale before World War I would settle down to modestly scaled interiors with seated or lying figures. They weren't going anywhere and neither was the artist. One of the finest paintings of the later years, the sumptuous *Le fauteuil rocaille* of 1946 (cat. New York 1992, pl. 378), celebrates this important fixture of domestic life. Only a ferociously censorious age like our own could find fault with Matisse's frequently quoted comparison of art with a comfortable armchair, for, knowing what we do about his health and what such a piece of furniture must have meant to him, it is a great great thing indeed when art can come to the relief of exhaustion and pain.

But then, suddenly, they're back – those standing, leaping, glowingly athletic figures – and on the old scale as well. *Jazz* had shown the way. Published in 1947, and consisting of twenty pochoir plates and text, it was based on cutout maquettes executed between 1943–46. Here, in these small works, scissors, paste and matte colored paper would disclose their immense potential. Solving the problems of mise-en-page, and left and right of folded sheets, changed his compositional strategies forever. One must deal with the reality of the book, the trough down its center, the thickness, the tendency of its boundary to overwhelm the center of each page through sheer matter-of-factness. But you can counter implosion with explosion; pile up forms at the center; put pictures within pictures; multiply boundaries only to violate them; burst through them out onto the real page of the book, and create the impression that all the leftover space in the world is at hand.

We jump forward to *Les mille et une nuits* of 1950, (cat. New York 1992, pl. 408), a railroad train of small, partially framed pictures, all hooked together, and heading eastward towards the rising sun of the narrative; beyond them, nothing but an immense and radiant white space pulsating with small hearts, red and green. Scheherezade has told one more enchanting tale and been granted yet another day of life. Or we look at *La piscine* (cat. New York 1992, pl. 406) of 1952, which adorned the artist's dining room. The elemental white band is shattered by light and flailing limbs. Bathers sink into it or soar, dolphin-like, out into the air. The great space of the wall itself, no longer confining, is now the very stuff of liberty's exuberant condition.

It was a miracle. Not only was he walking, he was leaping through the air and swimming too. He had re-won a

place in all three of the elements. The new technique made it possible to work in bed or sitting down. But there must have been a few misgivings. It is part of the ethic of art making to address with seriousness the question of relative permanence. These works are fragile, and, on a monumental scale, hard to protect. It is one thing when they are justified as maquettes for realizations in more enduring materials like stained glass, ceramics and stencils, or replaceable ones like fabrics; it is another when they are treated as ends in themselves. Yet obviously, he listened to his heart and its quickened beating; and we have all benefited from his reckless abandon. They reproduce wonderfully well and beam out at us from picture shop windows all over the world.

Schopenhauer, great in so many ways, was one of philosophy's finest aestheticians. He could be wonderfully precise and wrote how "Colours directly excite a keen delight, which reaches its highest degree when they are translucent."¹ The man who so devoted himself to painting Notre Dame from the outside would have frequently savored its stained glass from the inside, and that of Sainte Chapelle as well. But perhaps his favorite was St. Gervais, just behind the Hôtel de Ville, a late Gothic church with a Baroque facade and stunningly beautiful Renaissance windows – all purples, yellows, bottle greens, blues and reds. Whatever his preferences, much of the last years was spent looking into the colored light of imagined windows. The man who had depicted so many in his paintings would design them at the end. His last work was for a rose window. Unsurprisingly, these are among his most abstract compositions and they drew upon a lifetime's study of design problems and their solutions.

Consider borders. Matisse had put them around a number of his earlier compositions. The long years spent on *Nymphe dans la forêt*, 1935–c. 1942, (cat. New York 1992, pl. 353) hint at the conflicts which inevitably arise between borders and representational imagery, for borders, unlike this kind of imagery, know no orientation – top, bottom, left and right are all treated identically. A photo of 1941 shows that Nymph's frame contained a distractingly twisting leafy vine which the artist ultimately chose to largely suppress. This painting is full of wonderful things, but does it succeed? The question is posed not answered. The conceit of a painted tapestry is interesting, but whatever its merits, Matisse will never get himself into so tight a corner again. The struggle, certainly, is glorious, titanic. And we cannot forget that the splendid *Nymphe endormie et faune jouant de*

la flûte (cat. New York 1992, pl. 352) was a by-product. Yet unlike Michelangelo's *Bound Slave*, who will strain against his bonds forever, Matisse will break through his by putting the boundary *inside* the composition, as we have already seen. Later, when he puts a border on the outside, he will do so more appropriately, with essentially abstract imagery.

The wholeheartedly decorative projects he embarked upon needed borders to strengthen them. The two-dimensional shapes which he favors lack salience. The center needs underpinning so that it will project, not collapse, an underpinning that is at once coloristically structural and structurally coloristic. Let's see how this works in two window maquettes. All the border colors of *Poissons chinois* of 1951 (cat. New York 1992, pl. 392) – the tints of orange, yellow, blue and rose, are the same as those of the motifs. Only the green has been excluded. This makes possible several simultaneous and contradictory readings. Any color which touches an edge presents itself to the mind as a candidate for being the color of the *entire* ground. The mind may interpret the shapes it sees as being cut out of the gridded background, leaving exposed to view the firm ground of multiply competing colors beneath. Alternately, the mind will see that any color which touches the literal edge of the art object will share in its physical reality. Wherever that color is found in the rest of the picture, the mind will locate it on the same, physically real plane. This firms up the space. If that already strengthened color is seen to be attached to a form piled in front of others, it will come flying out at us with the desired salience, bringing the shape it occupies along with it.

Again, in *L'arbre de vie* of 1949 (cat. New York 1992, pl. 389) for the Vence chapel, an already extremely vertical format is further narrowed by yellow borders. Slyly sneaking out to the edges, however, is the blue and green ground, and so casually as to be unremarkable. Compression. Expansion. These stratagems strengthen the yellow enormously. Yes, Matisse was a great colorist. But color without light is dead. First, last, and always, his work is stupendously radiant.

And finally, *Lierre en fleur* (cat. New York 1992, pl. 410), a stained glass window maquette, and *Souvenir d'Océanie* (cat. New York 1992, pl. 411), both of 1953, both, virtually perfect squares, and both, virtually the same size. The former is flamboyantly decorative in its flatness; the latter, utterly pictorial in its depth and richness of space. But these very different compositions are surrounded by very similar borders with identical lower left

hand corner treatment. The narrow strips of sharp, penetrating black call out to the eye and to each other, seeking to link up, both in front of and behind the image they surround, providing tensile strength, a trampoline-like resiliency for the delightedly bouncing eye. And as we loft upwards, we see that yet another opportunity for creating an illusion has been taken. Of all quadrangles, a bordered square will show the least orientation, the least sense of top and bottom. For a moment, we change position. Now we're looking down. The wall has become floor, and, like Peter Pan, forever young, we soar, marvelling from on high.

Rilke wrote somewhere that God was mankind's first art object. If someone had asked Matisse what was mankind's second, surely he would have answered: Paradise. The human meaning of the cutouts, for him, for all of us, is unmistakable. The confining walls of civilized existence make shut-ins of us all. The photographs of his suite at the Hôtel Régina tell the story. From the foot of the bed we see a squadron of chasubles lifting heavenwards. The walls have been made to go away. In their place we're given tropical gardens, sportive bathers, and a decor fit for a sultan and his court. Scheherezade indeed.

I see him alone, late at night, in bed, scissoring colored paper, humming softly to himself; well, not completely alone. Death sits in a corner, at wit's end, enchanted, but desperate to know how and when the story will end. The great master of endings is consumed by curiosity. He wants to see more. But he's a busy man and this has not been a pleasant visit. Noone in the household takes him seriously. Yes, yes, they say, pain and suffering will track down all of us and sooner than we think, but they're not important. Courage, a seemingly pride, serenity, smiling affirmation – these things *are*. Death turns to the wall only to see *Grande décoration aux masques* (Cat. Washington 1977, pl. 203) of 1953 – gigantism with a smiling face; no, two smiling faces. Titanism without anguish or strain, (“Take that: Michelangelo”), it was the most baby-faced image he would ever make. Two identical units are set side by side. Don't choose, they say. Accept it all. Accept everything. With gratitude.

Furious that human heart could be so innocent, so generous, even at the end, death wheels round to seize his prey. But it's too late. A practised evader of his grasp eludes him yet again, if only for the last time. The painter has gone on ahead without him.

1 Schopenhauer. Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York 1969. vol. I, p. 199